

George M. Murrell House
Murrell Road, at the junction of
Willis Road
Park Hill vicinity
Cherokee County
Oklahoma

HABS No. OK-28

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

ADDITIONAL
FOLLOWS

GEORGE M. MURRELL HOUSE
(HUNTER'S HOME)Location:

Murrell Road, at the junction of Willis Road,
Park Hill vicinity, Cherokee County, Oklahoma.

USGS Park Hill Quadrangle, Universal Transverse
Mercator Coordinates: 15/323520/3969120.

Present Owner:

State of Oklahoma.

Present Use:

Museum, operated by the Oklahoma Parks
Department.

Significance:

The substantial house built circa 1844 for George Michael Murrell, merchant and postmaster of Park Hill and Tahlequah, was widely known as the center of genteel society before the Civil War. Murrell's fondness for the hunt, and the frequency with which it was held, gave the house its sobriquet. The style, furnishings, events and atmosphere of the house recalled Murrell's native Virginia and the plantation life in which he was raised, and was unusually luxurious for the predominantly rural area. It was the only grand establishment to survive the Civil War, but was not afterward occupied by the Murrells, who remained in the East after the war.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Circa 1844.
2. Architect: Not known. James S. Price is known to have done some carpentry, probably after the initial construction was completed.
3. Original and subsequent owners: There was no private ownership of land in the Cherokee Nation until allotments in severalty were made in 1906. With allotments, and eventually statehood, property records were kept, and title chains date from that time:

1908 Certificate of Allotment
Department of the Interior
Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes

Cherokee Roll - 16356

Certificate No. 38317

Cherokee Land Office

Muskogee, I.T.

January 15, 1907

Lulu V. Henderson (enrolled as Lulu V. Ross) has this day selected the following described land as homestead, vis.:

Subdivision of the west one-half of the Northeast quarter

and

east one-half of the Northwest quarter
of section 22 Township 16 Range 22

containing 40 acres, total appraised value of land \$110 (signed by) James Bixby, Chairman, Filed at Tahlequah, Oklahoma
October 1, 1908

(paraphrased from the allotment records to be found in the property records of Cherokee County, Courthouse, Tahlequah)

1909 Homestead Deed 29406

U.S. Department of the Interior

to

Lulu V. Henderson (enrolled as Ross)

22 January 1909

recorded 4 May 1921 Book 38 Page 539

1910 Warrant Deed

Lulu V. Henderson

to

N.D. Lewis

12 October 1910

recorded 31 October 1910 Book 6 Page 449

1914 Affidavit Vacating Town Lots, Blocks, Streets and Alleys

Cora E. Justus, nee Lewis and her husband Claude

January 17, 1914

filed the same day, Book 24 Page 75

1948 Warrant Deed

Billie McKee and L.D. McKee, his wife

to

The State of Oklahoma

25 June 1948

recorded 5 August 1948 Book 118 Page 206

(reference for the above is to the Office of the County Clerk, Cherokee County, Cherokee County Courthouse, Tahlequah, Oklahoma).

4. Original plans and construction: No original plans of building are known. However, the building's general construction plan indicates that the northernmost portion of the main block was first to be built, followed by a large ell connected to the east side. Construction may have occurred during several relatively short periods.
5. Alterations and additions: Later additions were built along the east, west and south sides of the house; one or two of them were the first porches. Local history insists that the entire lower part of the house was once completely enclosed by the porches. There is little evidence to support this claim.

The north corner of the east porch was originally rounded in plan, and was later changed to a square plan. A stair once stood in the south porch.

Early photos show that, with the possible exception of the south end of the house, all porches were removed at one time, probably before 1908. These were later reconstructed which did not precisely matched the original porches.

During the circa 1948-1955 restoration the shallow eaves of the main roof were made wider in order to accompany the returns on the gable-roofed pediment of the front entrance porch. A small cupola at the junction of the main and entrance roofs was removed at that time. The cupola is visible in photographs as recent as 1936.

Most original interior woodwork, including the fireplaces and mantels, remains intact. However, some liberties have been taken with the decoration of the house (which functions as a museum), the restorers having installed, aside from some original furniture (donated by Murrell descendants in Lynchburg, Virginia), Williamsburg wallpapers, exposed some of the structure in an inset in one of the parlor walls, and completely removed the wall finish down to the lath in what is now known as the kitchen. There has been a conscious attempt to make the house appear "colonial". Most local history uses that adjective, the only justification being that Murrell was from Virginia. The wide eaves may have been an attempt in this direction, and the first restoration of the porch employed large box-supports rather than the present and original openwork, in an attempt to provide columns for the pediment. The restoration was attempted during a phase of high popularity for the so-called "Colonial Revival" in the United States, and was pursued largely without the aid of professionals, under the enthusiastic leadership of local historians and descendants of the Murrells. The result is that the house is a curious blend of Federal, Neo-Classical and Colonial-Revival details.

- B. Historical Context: The house is known chiefly for its role as the capitol of society in the Cherokee Nation. Most of the "cavaliers" and men of affairs in the Nation resided at Park Hill for a while. The Murrells, while not principal among these, were perhaps the most active in securing the plantation way of life, which most of the important families had known in the Deep South. Murrell had married into the powerful Ross clan, the first family of the Cherokee Nation and leaders of the dominant political party. He was a merchant, having come from a Virginia plantation family, and was involved in maintaining another plantation at Goula Bayou in Louisiana. The Murrell family spent most of their time away from Park Hill at that property. The home he established in Indian Territory was known for its elegance and hospitality throughout the Cherokee Nation, and acquired the name "Hunter's Home" for Murrell's passion for fox hunts and the frequency with which he held them. At its height, Hunter's Home was the scene of frequent and lavish entertainments and parties.

Murrell's arrival in the Cherokee Nation probably coincided with that of the Ross family, in 1839-40. He was engaged to his first wife, Minerva Ross, at the time of the forced removal from the East, and was the business partner of her father, Lewis Ross (brother of Principal Chief John Ross) in East Tennessee. He was appointed Postmaster of Park Hill in 1844, using a portion of his store as a post office. Tahlequah, nearby political center of the Cherokee Nation of which Park Hill was the social reflection, had no post office of its own, and mail to the capitol had to be sent on horseback from Park Hill.

Minerva Ross Murrell died in 1855, and Murrell married her sister, Amanda Melvina. With the outbreak of Civil War, Murrell returned to his native Virginia to fight for the Confederacy. He mustered a cavalry troop which he took command with the rank of major. After the war, having suffered losses no less than any southern baron*, Murrell was forced to remain in the east and abandon the Park Hill establishment, the only one of the Cherokee estates to escape destruction. He returned to the Cherokee Nation only for a visit, spending the rest of his life in Virginia and Louisiana. The house passed through a succession of owners, ending with a series of tenants who used only the first floor, the upper floor having become infested with termites. The property was acquired by the Oklahoma Division of Parks in 1948. Restoration was begun soon after, and the house has functioned as a museum ever since.

*Ironically, Murrell's losses came from his eastern properties, rather than from those of the Cherokee Nation, which was among the areas most completely devastated by the war.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Murrell House is one of the best preserved, most pretentious high-style Federal residences built during the Cherokee occupancy of eastern Oklahoma.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent; some remodeling evident.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The two-story, L-shaped house measures 51'-4 7/8" x 74'-3 1/2". The front elevation has five bays.
2. Foundations: The house rests on a low foundation of well-cut coursed ashlar shaly-sandstone blocks. In front, these blocks have a bush-hammered center and chiseled margins; on the sides, they have been scabbled. Elsewhere, such as at the rear of the house and in the piers of the rear porch, the blocks seem to have been rock-faced, although they have weathered extensively.
3. Walls: For the most part, the walls are sheathed in wooden weatherboards, painted white, varying in width from 5 to 6 inches. There are exceptions: flush-cove siding is used around the front entrance of the house, under the first floor of the porch; quirked novelty board siding is used on the west wall of the library addition and 10-inch wide flush boards are used on its north side. Also, a flush cove siding is used on the west wall of the storage room. The ends of the walls are finished with quirked wooden corner boards, some of which have been replaced up to the second-floor level with plain boards, and a wooden water table, which is a simple strip projecting just above the foundation.
4. Structural system, framing: Hewn floor joists of 13" sycamore logs on 10"x14" squared plates rest on top of the stone wall. The house is of frame with timber studs, 18" on center, adzed on two sides (they may be seen in a window which exposes the first floor stairhall wall, in the northwest parlor room). In the front section, and in the ell, 3 1/2" x 4" studs (sawn both dimensions), are placed at the same interval. The attic has 1"x5" ridge beams supported by 4 1/2" x 3" rafters and 6 3/4" x 1 1/4" collar beams and a tongue-and-groove plank deck of recent date.
5. Porches: The wooden two-story single bay front porch, which is approached by three limestone block steps in pyramidal form, is a relatively recent fabrication. Groups of three 4" x 4"'s on each

of the two front corners (1974 replacements for earlier 4" x 4"'s) with 4" x 4" spacers between them and 4" x 4" block bases, are used to replace the former columns on both porch stories. The balustrades are 2" x 4" railings above and vase-shaped slats below (although the railing seems to have been installed upside down on the east side of the porch, for the slats are inverted). These balustrades enclose the sides of the first-floor porch, and the sides and front of the second-floor porch. Above is a triangular pediment, a total fabrication, with a tympanum of flush cove siding. The floor of the first-floor porch is narrow tongue-and-groove board, painted gray. The wide deck-lapboard of the second floor has been covered with tarpaper. The porch ceilings are of tongue-and-groove boards, painted white.

The right (west) side porch extends around three sides of the library addition. It has a ceiling of planed tongue-and-groove boarding painted white, and a narrow tongue-and-groove board floor, painted gray. 4" x 4" posts and 2" x 4" rails of plain design have been used to define the enclosure.

The rear (south) porch is totally a reconstruction, slightly modified from what was known to have been in its place: the rear steps have been removed to force the visiting public to re-trace their steps through the kitchen for security reasons. It is set upon large sandstone piers, and has large split-log joists supporting the tongue-and-groove board floor. An old column measuring 5 1/2" x 4 1/4" and a new column 5 1/2" x 5" composed of three boards support the 2" x 4" rafters and wide tongue-and-groove deck of the shed roof. The railings are of 2"x4"s and horizontal 1" x 4"s.

The left (east) side porch is somewhat more original. Seven wide limestone steps lead to a tongue-and-groove board floor, painted gray. The four original wooden columns, which rest on stone piers, are intersected by 2" x 4" porch railings with vase-shaped slats. A shed roof shelters the porch.

6. Chimneys: There are two interior end chimneys of gray limestone, one on either side wall of the front elevation; both are capped. Another chimney rises above the center of the two-story ell, at the ridge, and yet another rises above the single-story library addition along the inside of its west wall.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The front entrance is of Federal style. Symmetrically carved door trim frames the doorway with a semi-circular, seven-paned fanlight, meeting at the

top in a matching, splayed keystone. Multi-paned sidelights flank the double doors with recessed panels painted black. Similar recessed panels painted white are found throughout the entrance, giving a further touch of ornamentation.

- b. Windows, shutters: The majority of windows on the front and side elevations have double-hung sash with six-over-six lights, and are surrounded by architrave moldings. These windows have replacement shutters, with fixed louvers in two panels, and are painted black. (An older shutter, painted green, is in pieces under the rear porch). Six-over-one windows in plain trim are used on the library (without shutters), on the storeroom, and on the gable of the ell. Elsewhere in the house, new wooden double-hung sash with four-over-four lights (10" high, 12" wide) have been inserted in the frames of plain trim, again without shutters. Two Queen Anne sash, (with one large central pane being surrounded by a border of smaller panes) at the second-floor level, give light to the main stairwell above the landing. The cellar windows, at the rear of the east (left) elevation, are of wooden bars in a simple enframingent, and they have Queen Anne sash behind.

During the circa 1948-1955 restoration, two windows flanking the north chimney on the west side were closed. These were smaller than the windows of the first floor, and were probably additions.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: A low hipped roof covers the main block and is intersected by the gable roof of the ell. The library addition, its porch and the rear porch all have shed roofs, and all roof surfaces are covered with wood shingles.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The simple boxed cornice with short returns at the corners and applied square moldings is a recent fabrication. An inspection of the attic shows the rafters have been lifted from their normal position resting on the top wall plate. Extension "sprockets", pieces of wood made to extend the eaves, have been inserted between the rafters and the plate to frame the overhanging cornice.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Cellar: The cellar may be entered using the stairs leading from the dining room or from the rear of the building beneath the back (rear) porch. There are two rooms, the front being

the smaller, both with dirt floors, except that the latter has been given a sprinkling of crushed stone. It is used as a utility room; the other is vacant. Both rooms have rock-faced stone walls painted white and ceilings of exposed first floor joists and planks.

- b. First floor: Entering from the front, in the center bay of the north facade, the doors open into the center stairhall, with an open-well staircase beginning along the left-hand wall. To the right is the parlor, and to the left is the sitting room, behind which, in the ell, is the dining room, the kitchen, and kitchen storeroom. At the end of the front stairhall is the library, a room which was added alongside the dining room.
 - c. Second floor: The main staircase leads to the second story stairhall, which is the same width as that below. At the front along the left-hand wall is a narrower staircase which leads to the attic. To either side of the stairhall are the two principal bedrooms, and behind the bedroom on the left-hand side, over the dining room, is another bedroom. These are also accessible by a flight of stairs between them, from the dining room. Over the kitchen there is another room, which has been termed the "slaves quarters," which is accessible only by an enclosed cabinet dogleg staircase.
2. Stairways: The main two-flight, open-string stairway has scrolled brackets, simple balusters (2 to each tread) and a scrolled newel supported by several balusters. The underside of the stair is covered with paneled boards. A replacement chairrail is attached to the wall left of the stairhall and runs to upstairs hall. The dining room staircase is an open, two-flight (two-run with quarter landing on the first floor), arrangement, with similar simple brackets, square balusters and turned newels supporting the hardwood rail. The paneled boards, here, however, has been wallpapered to match the walls. The kitchen staircase to the single room ("slaves quarters") above is an enclosed cabinet stairs which begins to the right of the kitchen fireplace and has several winders.
 3. Flooring: The original wood floor remains throughout most of the house; it was reported only sanded and varnished when the house was acquired by the state. The boards are 5 to 7 inches wide and nearly 1 inch thick with tongue-and-groove edges. A new board floor was installed in the library by the state, and is about the same width, but doweled in place, rather than nailed. A new over-the-floor boarding has been placed on one side of the kitchen, to allow public access to the rear porch.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: In the majority of rooms, the ceilings and walls recently have been re-plastered and repapered, respectively (although none of the work was done on any historical basis). A few rooms have been treated differently. The kitchen walls have been stripped of their original plaster and the kitchen ceiling has been stripped of both its lath and plaster to expose the sawn studs, joists, and other parts of the structural system. On the walls and ceiling of the "slaves" bedroom, the original plaster remains. The walls and ceiling of the storeroom adjacent to the kitchen are covered with composition fiber boards painted white.
5. Doorways and doors: Six-panel doors (having two tiers of three recessed panels) with symmetrical trim and incised circle corner blocks are used in the parlor, the first floor stairhall and the sitting room. Similar paneled doors are used in the dining room, but with an architrave trim. The library doorways are framed in a simplified symmetrical molding and plain corner blocks. In the kitchen a narrow quirkedged trim is used to enframe the vertical board and horizontal batten doors. On the second floor an architrave trim is used in the bedrooms and stairhall. Original doors of two recessed panels are used throughout. There are no doors in the "slaves" bedroom.
5. Decorative features and trim: Paneled spandrels beneath the interior of the window openings enhance the parlor and dining room. The fireplace of the northwest parlor has its mantelpiece supported by fluted half-columns mounted on a plain pedestal. Below the cornice is a narrow band of molded trim and circle corner blocks. The fireplace of the sitting room is similar, but with Doric half-columns. Dining room and bedroom fireplaces are also similar.
6. Hardware: A boxlock on the inside of the door of the first-floor stairhall leading to the right (west) porch, and on the front door of the second-floor stairhall, both bear the circular seal of "J. Carpenter, patenee".
7. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: The house is heated by a series of open flame gas jets hidden in the "fake" woodpiles in the fireplaces of the parlor, sitting room, dining room, bedrooms and kitchen. No other temperature control devices are used, with the exception of a large (three-feet high and three-feet wide, 9-inch deep) electric fan, in the doorway of the second floor porch.

- b. Lighting: The house has been wired for electricity. An ornate lamp, suspended from the ceiling of the first-floor stairhall, was manufactured circa 1875-1885 (see photo, HABS No. OK-28-8). It was later converted to electricity, as were all other similar lamps.
- c. Plumbing: There is no plumbing in the house. An electric water cooler, fed from the springhouse at the rear of the property, is on the west porch, behind the library.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house faces due north, at the head of a T-shaped intersection of two country roads. Large trees surround the house, and several kinds of shrubs and flowers grow in its shade. A plank fence, with cross rails and a chicken-wire backing, encloses the front yard. The rear is bounded by the Park Hill Branch.
2. Historic landscape design: Perhaps the most notable feature of the yard are the brick walks in herringbone pattern, which are said to be original. The walk to the right is said to have led to a vegetable and flower garden, approximately where the curator's bungalow now stands. To the left the walk led to the barn, a slight distance away. The large catalpas, walnuts and old cottonwoods which dominate the grounds are especially grand along the shallow running Park Hill Branch or Creek, a spring fed stream emptying into the Illinois River.
3. Outbuildings: A single-story brick (common bond) smokehouse is directly behind the house, to the south. It has a wood shingle covered roof. It is built on a random stone foundation, has a segmental doorway, and a single louvered window in its left (south) side wall. It has 4" x 8" beams spanning approximately 15 feet width, with 2" x 6" rafters and a plank roof deck, and a dirt floor. The door is a vertical board batten type, encased in a simple frame.

A single-story limestone springhouse, sunk in the ground, is at the rear of the grounds near the creek. Its walls are 18 inches thick, its floor is of limestone and its roof of 2" x 4" rafters with a tongue-and-groove deck covered with wood shingles. The electric water pump and a storage tank are enclosed in a box of novelty siding, built on an angle iron base. The two window openings on the south and east sides are splayed on the inside, but no windows or doors remain.

A recent single-story frame shed "outhouse" with a single commode and sink for the men's room and the same for the adjacent ladies' room has been built to the rear and to the left of the house

(Southeast of the house). It is constructed on a poured concrete slab, of 2" x 4"s, sheathed in wide weatherboards and has a nearly flat shingle roof.

The single-story frame bungalow to the right (west) of the house is now the residence of the curator. It is sheathed in narrow weatherboarding, and rests on a concrete block foundation, all painted white. The roof is of asphalt shingle.

A log house used as a cottage is located in the south yard of the property. A chimney flanked by two small, square windows is on the west side. Plaster has been filled between logs. The roof is gabled with a wood shingle covering.

Prepared by:

Michael A. Tomlan
Field Supervisor
Historic American Buildings Survey
Summer 1975

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early Views:

Photograph and clipping collection of Mrs. Mary Smith Witcher, Tahlequah: two frontal views of the house, dated 1936 and 1953.

Gilcrease Institute Library, Tulsa: one frontal view, probably turn of the 20th century.

Cherokee National Historical Society, Cherokee Archives, Tahlequah: five photographs, taken between 1890 and 1910: spring house and rear of main house; northeast corner of main house with north and east porches visible; view of smokehouse with south end of west porch; photograph of "walnut barn"; glass negative, frontal view, east porch visible (has rounded end).

Oklahoma Historical Society: recent photograph taken from north of house; recent photograph from south, photograph from northeast taken before restoration or just as its commencement; various photographs of outbuildings.

C. Interviews:

Oklahoma Historical Society Pioneer-Indian History, Interview transcript, S.W. Ross, 26 April 1938, on file at the Indian Archives, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City.

Mr. Rex Presley, supervisor, under the employ of the Department of Parks, for much of the restoration: telephone interview, 25 June 1975. Mr. Presley is superintendent of Sequoyah State Park.

Mrs. Marguerite Ross, curator at the Murrell House from 1959 to 1966. Mrs. Ross was married to a lineal descendant of John Ross, whose family occupied the house at the turn of the century, Telephone interview 14 August 1975.

D. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

National Register of Historic Places. Inventory - Nomination Form. Washington, D.C.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Dale, Edward Everett, and Litton, Gaston. Cherokee Cavaliers. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, third printing, 1969.

Foreman, Carolyn Thomas. Park Hill. Muskogee, Oklahoma: Press of the Star Printery, 1948.

Fullerton, Eula E. "Some Social Institutions Among the Cherokee, 1820-1906." M.A. history thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1931.

Murrell House brochure (author unknown).

Various newspaper clippings from the Witcher collection, largely unidentified, but coming from local papers: "Murrell House Acquires Rare Antique Furniture From Ross Home," "Athens of the Western Wilderness' Where Culture Thrived in Early Days", "Murrell House is Readied for Workmen", "Antebellum Home Restored", "Clean-Up Starts At Old Murrell House".

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in cooperation with the Oklahoma Historical Society and the Cherokee National Historical Society. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed during the summer of 1975, at the HABS Field Office on the campus of Northeastern Oklahoma State University, Tahlequah, Oklahoma by Michael A. Tomlan (Cornell University), Project Supervisor; John D. Hnedak (Cornell University), Project Historian; Bethanie C. Grashof (University of Florida), Vicki J. Higgins (University of Cincinnati), Nicholas H. Holmes III (Auburn University) and Roger D. Swayze (University of Oregon), student

assistant architects. The written descriptive data was edited for permanent HABS collection at the Library of Congress by Susan McCown, a HABS staff historian in the Washington, D.C. office, in the winter of 1981. Walter Smalling, Jr. of Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, U.S. Department of the Interior took the documentary photos of the building in October of 1979.

ADDENDUM TO
GEORGE M. MURRELL HOUSE
(HUNTER'S HOME)
Murrell Road
Park Hill Vicinity
Cherokee County
Oklahoma

HABS No. OK-28

*HABS
OK-A,
11-FAIRLY,
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY
National Park Service
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